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# THE JOURNAL OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

VOLUME 18

*JUNE—1910*

NUMBER 6

## A SYMPOSIUM ON THE TEACHING OF ELEMENTARY ECONOMICS THIS YEAR'S EXPERIENCE AT HARVARD

The writer's own experience in the teaching of elementary economics has not been very extensive. It covered six years of work in Oberlin College, where he had classes ranging from forty to sixty students, and the present year in Harvard, where the class numbers about four hundred and fifty. Where the class is small enough to permit it, the method of classroom discussion is undoubtedly the ideal method. Considerable quizzing on the assigned reading is sometimes necessary in order to test the student's ability to think clearly and critically, and, sometimes, to provoke discussion, or to force the students out of an attitude of passive receptivity into one of active inquiry. It is needless to say that such questioning must be wisely directed by an instructor who is himself capable of clear, original, and accurate thinking.

Where, as at Harvard and other large universities, the classes have become too large for this method, the lecture system proved a cheap but very poor substitute, though, strangely enough, it was at one time thought to be a more high-toned method. A number of years ago, however, a compromise method was adopted at Harvard, by which the whole class was lectured to in a body twice a week, and then divided up into sections, ranging

from thirty to fifty men each, for quiz and discussion one day in the week. These section-meetings were conducted by younger instructors and assistants, but it is now the policy here to call into this work men of the grade of doctors of philosophy who are prepared to take full professorships in small colleges. The elementary course is regarded as our most important course and (excepting the present year) the lectures have been given by the oldest and best-known member of the department.

During the present year an experiment has been, or is being, tried. From the beginning of the year until the Christmas holidays, the regular method of two lectures and one section-meeting a week was continued. From the beginning of January to the April recess the method of one lecture and two section-meetings a week was tried. During the remainder of the year we are following the original method again. Thus both methods will have been tried on the same body of students, which probably gives a better basis of comparison than trying them on two different bodies of students.

Just before the April recess an expression of opinion by the students was asked for, each student being requested to write out his opinion, and the reasons therefor, as to the comparative merits of the two methods. They were also advised to write anonymously, though they did not all follow this advice. Many of the reasons given show indubitable signs of having been invented because of the student's belief that reasons were expected, and that he would not be doing his full duty unless he gave reasons. But the general result was probably very significant. About three out of every four students expressed a preference for the method of one lecture and two section-meetings, and only about one out of every four was in favor of the older method.

Four facts ought to be mentioned, however, as having some possible bearing on the case. In the first place, Professor Taussig, who has hitherto had charge of the course, and who is a past master in the art of undergraduate instruction, is absent from Cambridge this year. In the second place, the method of one lecture and two section-meetings a week was carried on during the period when the more difficult and theoretical parts of the

subject were being presented, particularly the theories of value and distribution. The theoretical part of the subject is the least adapted to the lecture method—economic theory, when presented in formal lectures to undergraduates, having the same tendency as the proverbial water on the duck's back. In the third place we have this year an unusually strong corps of instructors and assistants in charge of the section-meetings. In the fourth place, the expressions of opinion were requested through, and collected by, the instructors who conduct the section-meetings and who are all deservedly popular. How much this may have unconsciously affected the expressions of opinion, if it did so at all, is entirely conjectural.

In so far as this expression of opinion is a test of the efficiency of the two methods—and the writer believes it to be a good test—it is overwhelmingly in favor of one lecture and two section-meetings.

During the period when we were trying the method of giving one lecture a week, we were covering, as already stated, the general theory of distribution. The writer, who gave the lectures, went on the theory that the lectures should be somewhat dogmatic in form, the work of criticism, qualification, and supplementation being left mainly to the section-meetings. Had the same subject been treated under the other method, the manner of presentation would have been a little less dogmatic and more time would have been given to qualification, explanation, and criticism. However, it is the writer's opinion that the lecture method is peculiarly ineffective as a means of presenting such material. But the dogmatic presentation, wherein only the general outlines of the theories are stated, in the form of a series of definite propositions, and the supporting arguments stated in definite terms, is possible under the lecture method, which is for this special purpose perhaps as effective as any other.

As an aid to this dogmatic presentation, an outline of each lecture was drawn up in the form of a brief in which the various propositions were so arranged as to support one another. This outline was written on the blackboard. Its expediency is open to question. It is undoubtedly of value to the good students who

are willing to do a fair amount of work anyway. They are enabled, by this method, to accomplish more, or to gain a more nearly complete mastery of the subject with the time and energy which they are able to give to it. But for the student who is only intent on getting a passing mark, it is frequently regarded as a means of reducing the amount of work necessary to the accomplishment of that purpose. To such men it was no real help and may have been an injury in that it tended to deepen the habit of drifting along the line of least resistance. Whether, therefore, this is regarded as an expedient method will depend upon one's idea of the teacher's function. If his function is primarily to be of service to the good student, and to enable him to accomplish the maximum with the strength which he possesses, the method is expedient. If it is primarily to prod up the lag-gards and help them to acquire a certain standard of industry and of interest in things intellectual, then it is an inexpedient method. On the whole the writer favors this method in the teaching of undergraduates, though it needs to be used with care and prudence.

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#### ECONOMICS FOR CHILDREN

Can economics be taught in the schools of the lower grade? This question really asks whether it can be taught at all to the vast majority of citizens, and whether a government can be conducted in the light of such knowledge of the subject as a people can thus secure. A great part of what governments are now compelled to do lies in the realm of practical economics. We are beginning to regulate freight charges, to conserve and wisely utilize natural resources, to change our currency and remodel our tariff. We are taking a hand in the settlement of the wages problem and considering whether the activities of the state shall be so extended as to include the management of railroads, mines, and forests. On all these questions we have to appeal to the people and it is their rights and interests that are involved in the decisions that are reached. It is a very great